

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291252029>

From smart fan to backyard wrestler: Performance, context, and aesthetic violence

Chapter · January 2007

CITATIONS

8

READS

137

2 authors, including:



[S. Elizabeth Bird](#)

University of South Florida

81 PUBLICATIONS 1,309 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The Asaba Memorial Project [View project](#)

through their symbolic value, serving as a physical, earthly focus for something greater and intangible. This is what Sandvoss, drawing on Edward Relph, calls “other-directedness,” places not experienced in and for themselves but in reference to absent codes and symbols” (2005a: 58). The alley, the grave, the stadium, the station may seem mundane to non-fans; but once the pilgrim has made the geographical journey, he or she makes an internal leap (“this is where Deckard stood . . . this is where Carroll lies”) that completes the connection and enables communion. Just as a fan may “travel” metaphorically without moving to a place of belonging, so fans who travel physically may well, at their destination, still have a symbolic journey ahead of them.

From Smart Fan to Backyard Wrestler Performance, Context, and Aesthetic Violence

Lawrence B. McBride and S. Elizabeth Bird

Prologue

I was backstage[. . .] Stu burst in the doors after his match, his head streaked with blood. No one could see where the wound was. After cleaning him off, I realized that the wound was negligible—barely a half-centimeter long[. . .] Since he was appearing later in the show, we helped him dress it with yards of gauze which were then decorated with theatrical blood[. . .] I found out later that Stu had bladed during the match, and that he had not told anyone beforehand, except his opponent. He didn't even tell me about it as I wiped the blood from his bald head. Another layer of deception was laid down as an outrageous bandage soaked in fake blood was used to cover a real cut. I began to realize that I lacked the heart to survive in a field in which reality was so fragmented. There was much to wrestling that I still didn't understand. (Lawrence B. McBride, Summer 2001, Bloomington, Illinois)

Introduction

The 1990s saw the proliferation of backyard wrestling federations, inspired by the showmanship of professional, televised wrestling, but operated locally and autonomously by young, mostly male wrestling fans performing on family property. Backyard wrestlers build their own rings, use trampolines as rings, or simply spray paint a square on the ground, where

they perform free for audiences of schoolmates and friends. The development of backyard wrestling depended as much on the availability of cheap, portable technology, such as camcorders, as it did on the existence of the spectacle of professional wrestling. How fans became wrestlers, operating in their own, self-constructed reality, is the subject of this chapter.

The backyard wrestling phenomenon illustrates the complexity of wrestling as a mass-mediated cultural phenomenon, operating on multiple levels of spectatorship and performance. This chapter draws from ethnographic research by McBride with two local wrestling promotions (such groups are called independent wrestling federations, or indy feds) that began as backyard groups: the Chicago area's Lunatic Wrestling Federation (LWF), and Fucked Up Wrestling (FUW), which operated in central Illinois. We show how fans, grounded in a media/audience spectator aesthetic, become active producers and performers themselves.

Wrestling as Ritual

Today's pro wrestling is the most recent manifestation of a century-old American tradition that has reconfigured itself often, adapting to the circus side-show, the saloon/vaudeville circuit, the first urban sports arenas, the earliest one-camera live television, then cable, then the Internet. Throughout, the show's core element has been a distinctive style of ritualized combat taking place in a space resembling a boxing ring. The word "ritualized" is appropriate, in that the performers assume alien identities within the tight delimitations of the wrestling show. These identities, called "gimmicks," are the morally significant agents in the plots of wrestling shows, which involve cheating villains ("heels") and honest heroes ("babyfaces"). But the spectators' performance of credulity in the face of the fantastic nature of the display is the primary element that qualifies the show as "ritual," distinguishing it from contemporary sports (Barthes 1972; Morton & O'Brien 1985). As Jenkins (1997) points out, pro wrestling can also be productively interpreted as melodrama, of a kind specially tailored to the male imagination. To point out that wrestling is fake is to miss the point; to suspend judgment and play along is to begin to enjoy it.

Nevertheless, wrestling, and by extension, its fandom, is one of the most denigrated forms of popular culture. Twitchell (1992) groups it with

a few other genres as epitomizing the carnivalesque "trashing of taste" in American culture. Commentators decry the way televised wrestling validates the hegemony of class (Freedman 1983), gender and sexualities (Jhally 2003), or ethnicities (Lincoln 1989; Mondak 1989). Woo and Kim (2003: 361) conclude that wrestling's "anti-social content" ("aggressive acts, rule violations, and glamorization of violence") may influence young people to become violent and antisocial. Inherent in these critiques is the assumption that wrestling fans routinely take the staged contests at face value. It is not our intention to dispute the presence of violent, sexist, racist, and generally "antisocial" imagery in professional wrestling. However, wrestling is not monolithic; we argue that both scholars and social critics have missed many layers of meaning and experience, particularly those of backyard wrestlers, indy wrestlers, and Smart Fans (discussed below) where complex distinctions operate between spectators and performers, real and unreal. Backyard wrestling is an integration of productive practice and an aesthetic bound to a specific fandom context.

The Rise of Backyard Wrestling

To explain the structure of backyard wrestling federations, we invoke a participant's account, describing how a federation was formed and revealing both the broader context of pro wrestling and the way specific fan behaviors such as backyard wrestling have meaning in that context. In Spring 2000, McBride interviewed "Billy Whack," a young man who performed as the ring announcer and color commentator for the LWF, while observing a training session at "the Factory," LWF's rental space in a complex of small warehouses in Mokena, Illinois. One wall was a huge garage door, which was open. Most of the space was taken up by the ring, and in the deepest part of the room, behind the ring, a couch and some chairs were arranged around a TV and VCR. In the ring, young men performed drills, repeating the same moves over and over.

Whack described how LWF began. One summer in the early 1990s, he and some friends gathered at home to watch *Wrestlemania*, an annual Pay-Per-View wrestling show staged by the WWF (later WWE). Afterwards, the fans went out to the yard, and "somebody stuck four sticks in the ground and put a crappy rope around, and we just jumped around like idiots. We're all winded and sore and tired, and we weren't even doin' any moves, just punchin' and kickin' and jumpin'." This odd diversion was

captured on videotape. The next day, the young man who would become Billy Whack watched the tape with a friend:

It was the worst, poorly lit, crappy[...] And, I'm like "Wow [...] this is pretty cool." And then me and him came to the idea that we should try to organize this, do it a little bit better, maybe write a little story line, come up with some characters[...]. Let's call it the Lunatic Wrestling Federation. So my parents were going away for a weekend, so I ran out there and we put four poles in the ground, put these little clamp lights up and we jumped around like idiots and videotaped it, and we had the little bell and everything. We brought in more people; and that's what we did for the summer of '93.

The summer of 1994 saw more backyard LWF shows, now featuring a plywood ring built by the wrestlers. Winters were spent planning and writing future shows and storylines. The year 1995 was a breakthrough one, with the opportunity to stage a show on a ten-acre property belonging to a friend's parents:

So we figured, let's try to promote this[...] We handed out fliers at the high school. And we had like 350 people show up [...] we had lights and little cameras and everything. We were getting to be really good. Well, we were saving our money, let's just buy a wrestling ring. We spent everything we had, which was about four thousand five hundred bucks[...] They delivered it, set it up. We jumped around like idiots. You see a recurring pattern. We said let's trademark everything: we have these names, we have these gimmicks, we had these ideas. And let's start putting on real shows. So we planned for a whole year and in October of '97, we had Bloodbath '97 at the Romeoville rec center. Like ten bucks a head, and we were makin' money and we couldn't believe it[...] Then we found we had to get a promoter's license, and take out an insurance policy just for the night on the audience, rent the venue, and a DJ, for the music equipment. We were finding out it was pretty costly. It just gets crazier each day, like I never know what's going to happen next. I've met tons of wrestlers and the people I've met through this, [gestures behind him to the students] we're running training camp on Wednesdays, we're doing shows, we're about to get a TV deal. We have an actual TV camera crew come out and film it, edit the tape, we sell the tape, [and] we're about to start sellin' merchandise off our web site.

The FUW began in a similar way in Bloomington, Illinois, in 1999, when spontaneous wrestling broke out as a few young fans were watching RAW on TV. Soon a committed group of about twenty 18–21-year-olds, most of them male, was devoting significant resources to FUW, practicing, buying costumes and props, and eventually paying dues to support the costs of promotion and insurance. When the group folded in 2003, it had performed in bars, the county fairgrounds, and the local National Guard Armory, charging anywhere from five dollars to fifteen dollars for admission. Neither the LWF nor the FUW turned a profit in the long term despite their eventual popularity.

Backyard wrestling federations are to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) what garage bands are to world-famous rock bands. Despite the staggering disparity in production values, all groups work in the same idiom: they write storylines and create original characters, who perform the same style of ritualized wrestling. Backyard wrestlers do not simply parody or role play the WWE, but develop their own scenarios, even when they have no consistent fans of their own, using camcorders to record and then critique their performances.

Within wrestling culture, backyard wrestling emerged alongside and within the context of the "Smart Fan" phenomenon. When McBride first met FUW wrestlers, they stated immediately that the most important thing to know about wrestling was the difference between Marks and Smarts. Smarts are "Smart to the business," while Marks appear to believe in the authenticity of the competition—Smarts see them as the stereotypical "dupes" imagined by wrestling's critics. Smarts approach the genre of wrestling as would-be insiders, while Marks root unreflexively for the most popular faces. Smart fans possess truly incredible amounts of knowledge about the history of wrestling, including wrestlers' real names and career histories, how various promotions began and folded, who won every Wrestlemania ever. Smart fan informants defined a Mark specifically as someone who responds to wrestling in the way intended by the people who write the storylines (the bookers), describing Marks with statements such as "Kids are Marks" or "We were all Marks when we were kids." Smarts view Marks with scorn.

Interested in the behind-the-scenes action of WWE personnel decisions and the process of scripting the televised shows, Smart fans parallel many other familiar fan cultures (Hills 2002), whose members are as much interested in movie studio politics and the strategic maneuvers of contract

negotiations as in movies or TV shows themselves. Fully cognizant of the staged nature of wrestling, Smarts follow the WWE not just to see the shows, but to keep track of what "the Fed" is doing. Generally, backyard wrestlers considered themselves Smarts; however, their "readings" of the televised productions of the large promotions were not wholly ironic, in the self-conscious sense of some other consumers of "trash" media (see Bird 1992). Even though these fans' enjoyment of televised wrestling was occasionally preempted by their critical attitude, they respected the WWE as the elite level of the wrestling world, appreciating the artistry of the productions.

Smart fans also call themselves Internet fans. As noted by many scholars, the Internet has opened up a new world of communication for fan cultures (see Bird 2003; Hills 2002; McKee 2001b), which also coincided with the appropriation of other communications technology, such as the video technology central to backyard wrestling, and the techniques of building rings and staging. Smarts voraciously consume information on insider websites, referred to as "dirt sheets," which also leak results. When McBride met his FUW research participants, they would already know what was going to happen on Monday night televised wrestling, including match outcomes. Beyond reporting on the major wrestling promotions, dirt sheets also report on the indy feds, and the Internet provides an arena for Smart fans to meet and establish tape-trading relationships. Smarts and backyard wrestlers devote hours to watching tapes of independent wrestling federations from around the country, as well as Japanese and Mexican wrestling shows, old-school wrestling (from before cable TV), and the much-coveted shoot interviews, in which wrestlers would appear out of character and share humorous and harrowing stories about life in "the business."

Today's young people are often disapprovingly characterized as the "media generation." However, media saturation does not necessarily mean total subjection; media participation may produce rich intertextual productivity (Drotner 2000). For decades, fan cultures have translated Smart spectatorship into shared storytelling through fan fiction, conventions, and dramatic recreations (Bacon-Smith 1992; Bird 2003; Jenkins 1992). The presence of a portable camcorder in a household hosting a large group of young fans watching WWE might be the decisive factor in the transition from play to production that we see in the LWF and FUW stories. The idea to "try to organize this, do it a little bit better" came to countless, isolated groups of young wrestling fans first watching them-

selves on tape—the recording, playing, critique, and exchange of tapes is as much part of the backyard wrestling phenomenon as the matches themselves. And the Internet was the medium that defined the further development of these groups. Online, the young fans could learn tricks of the business, such as "blading"—secretly cutting their own scalps during matches to create the illusion of having been "busted wide open." Using Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) fan typology, Smart fans could be defined as "enthusiasts," while backyard wrestlers have moved to become "producers," although generally emerging from and remaining in the Smart fan position.

Aesthetics and Contexts

By the time the Smart aesthetic in wrestling developed, the WWE had for years been distancing itself from the pretense of being a real sport, decreasing the physicality of its wrestling in favor of fantastic character development and storylines. Although the wrestling done at all three levels (national, indy, and backyard) fits within the same idiom, a qualitative difference among the shows is evident. The typical Monday night cable wrestling shows consisted of more talking and skits than actual wrestling, while indy shows are generally action packed, with more intense moves. There is a basic economic factor explaining this. When fully professional wrestlers are severely injured, they can suffer serious financial loss and carefully planned storylines can be disrupted. For indy wrestlers, however, paychecks are not as substantial; many view wrestling as a hobby, and almost all have day jobs. In that context, more risks are taken because, as at an "indy rock" show, it is the quality of the performers' and audiences' experience that is most important. In the backyard, many risks are taken, and the risks are compounded by lack of training. Yet FUW wrestlers argued that there is no excuse for being stupid and taking terrible risks, and certain moves, particularly the "pile driver," were banned in the FUW.

In backyard wrestling, some kids have taken such risks with their bodies that the phenomenon has been sensationalized by mainstream media as a horror story about deviant youth (e.g. Reilly 2001). However, risk is part of the idiom common to all three levels of wrestling. Wrestlers see wrestling moves as falling along a scale that runs from low-risk to high-risk. Low-risk spots include punches and kicks, and submission-style wrestling. Being thrown through a table is a high-risk spot. Ranged

between the extremes are seemingly hundreds of variations of "hurricanes," "moonsaults," and "suplexes." Generally, low-risk spots have less potential for pain and injury.

When, in 1994, regional promotion Eastern Championship Wrestling changed its name to Extreme Championship Wrestling, it embraced what became known as the "hardcore" style. This meant that in some matches the face/heel distinction was deemphasized, and the action centered around extremes of violence, generous use of weapons, and copious amounts of (real) bleeding. The pick-you-up-and-slam-you-down moves were still there, but there might be thumbtacks or barbed wire spread around the ring. ECW crowds would chant "ta-blet ta-blet ta-blet" as they waited for the inevitable slam-through-a-wooden-table move. Folding step ladders also became integrated into hardcore-technique ECW wrestling shows. Instead of jumping off the top rope to crush an opponent, wrestlers might reach under the ring and retrieve one of these ladders, to gain altitude for higher flight.

FUW wrestlers made it clear there was a limit to the acceptability of hardcore wrestling, beyond which was "garbage wrestling," seen as hardcore and bloody, but artless. They believed hardcore elements were best used sparingly, within the context of a good match. Good wrestling was supposed to look as if it hurt, but as far as possible, pain was to be controlled. The use of hardcore spots and weapons in the FUW reflected this. Getting hit on the head with a steel chair (a chair shot) looks brutal, makes a loud noise, but doesn't hurt too much, relative to the spot's effect on the audience.

Smart fans fueled the success of ECW and the indie wrestling scene, which in turn shaped the dominant aesthetic among Smarts and backyard wrestlers. This aesthetic was not centered on violence or bleeding; Smarts avidly sought out tapes of old American shows featuring what became known as "old school" wrestling, which mainly involves a seemingly infinite repertoire of ingenious submission holds. Japanese and Mexican wrestling, highly valued by Smarts, has evolved to include a much more intricate, stylized, and gymnastic set of high-flyer moves.

Among Smart fans and backyard wrestlers, high-risk moves are more valued, because they understand this behavior as a form of generosity. The generous wrestler will give his all in a performance to ensure a dual outcome: the match will be spectacular, benefitting the fans, and each wrestler will make his "opponent" look good, helping him "get over with the fans." Generosity in wrestling is a major theme in wrestler Mick Foley's (1999)

memoir. Foley describes how selfish wrestlers, on the receiving end of a high-risk move, will be more concerned with avoiding injury than with making the wrestling look convincing. This prevents the wrestler on offense from looking powerful, and thus does his career little good. While the ideal in pro wrestling is a balance of concern for safety and willingness to absorb punishment, both are needed in a good match.

Smart fans, most of whom have read Foley's book, understand this ideal. Thus, unlike Marks, who are mostly content to go along for the ride, Smarts often form strong emotional attachments to those wrestlers who go to the greatest lengths to bear the burden of the performance. For instance, according to this aesthetic, the FUW research participants considered the famous Foley vs. Terry Funk "exploding ring match" of August 18, 1995, in Yokohama, Japan, to be "one of the greatest of all time" (see Foley 1999 for a full account). Foley and Funk were each badly burned in the match, for which the ring ropes had been replaced with barbed wire, and the ring rigged with firework-like explosives. At one point, Foley hit Funk in the head with a metal step ladder; Funk then pushed Foley off that ladder into the barbed wire ropes, as Foley was preparing to dive down onto Funk, leading with the elbow. Foley won the match:

While I celebrated, Terry was placed in an ambulance and rushed to the hospital. It was truly a touching scene as the adoring crowd reached out just to touch him, and chanted his name. Terry had done me a gigantic favor.

Terry had only lost a couple of matches in the last decade in Japan, and a victory over the Funker was a huge milestone. Terry Funk [...] had just given me a hell of a gift. (Foley 1999: 337)

Thus, without the ideal of the generous wrestler, the hardcore aesthetic would indeed be meaningless violence. As to why Smart fans took the ideal to heart so completely as to begin wrestling in hardcore style in their backyards, we submit that the essence of wrestling must be experienced first-hand to be fully known. At a performance, the anticipation of the match, the crowd's noise, and the impact of the moves will trigger what wrestlers understand as an "adrenaline," or "fight or flight" response, which mitigates pain, and which arguably constitutes an altered state of consciousness. This response allows them to withstand a level of physical punishment (falls from high balconies, deep lacerations, serious burns, and so on) that shocks those not initiated into wrestling fandom. When wrestlers achieve this state, they can perform in seemingly superhuman

ways, allowing wrestling to become truly spectacular; this altered state can become the motivation to continue (for an extended discussion, see McBride 2005). Backyard wrestling, then, is a fan culture based on physical experience in a way rarely if ever described in the literature on fans, although perhaps closest to Grossberg's (1984b) discussion of the physical experience of rock music fandom. The experience was described by FUW wrestler "Dre" following a match in which he had been "powerbombed" through a table, a spectacular move that shattered the table and caused a huge crowd reaction. "It just felt so good. That table just exploded," commented Dre, adding later, "You know, when we're in the ring it's like a trance we go into." Another interviewee, South Florida indy wrestler Mark Zout, commented, "it just gets your blood pumping in a different way, and it's almost indescribable the rush you get" (McBride 2005: 69).

In spite of media condemnation of backyard wrestling as pure viciousness, appealing to the very worst in young people, Smart fans and backyard wrestlers subscribe to their own standards of behavior. They will discuss the appropriateness of certain approaches, as well as their disgust for stereotypical views of their sport. For instance, a column posted on the site "Obsessed with Wrestling" described backyard wrestling as "the very slap in the face of professional wrestling" that has "idiots buying into it like a cheap reason to go to school to 'meet chicks.'" The column's author, Brian Bertrand (2004), was referring primarily to cheaply made tapes of violent wrestling that featured multiple props. A fan responded that Bertrand

has based [his criticism] on what is seen in the "Best of Backyard Wrestling" tapes, and has never seen what else has been done. Being a backyarder myself, I cannot say that I have ever hit anyone with a light-tube, used fire, or ever jumped off a roof onto someone in four years[....] The only reason the public believes backyard wrestling is wrong is because they have only seen the brainless idiots who have no skill beating each other with weapons[....] All backyard wrestlers take pride in what they do. You bashing what people have put so much work into perfecting makes us look like idiots, which we are not.

Others joined in, describing the artistry of their moves and the rules that govern the experience:

I became involved in backyard wrestling when I was twelve years old[....] I was anxious beyond belief, but soon realized that these new found friends

of mine were very much like me. I had never been exposed to backyard wrestling before, but I'm certainly glad that my first experience was with these gentlemen [...] competitive, but sports oriented, not violent. It was a great experience and gave me much of the confidence I was lacking in my earlier life.

Of course backyard wrestling is violent. Indeed, as we emphasize, the managed, performed pain is an integral and motivating part of the experience. We can see how the hardcore idiom within wrestling is the expression of the refinement of the physiological pathway to wrestling consciousness and peak wrestling experience. The realness of the spectacle runs away with the pageantry, as real weapons cause real injury, doubtless releasing the "adrenaline" that is repeatedly referenced by wrestlers as a goal. Nevertheless, the experience is not uncontrolled, mindless viciousness, as critics suggest.

Conclusion

The "meaning" of American wrestling is so often taken to lie at the surface, inscribed with a conventional, reactionary symbolism of racism, sexism, and jingoism, and thus meriting widespread condemnation. For instance, Sut Jhally, discussing the effect of televised wrestling, shows little appreciation for any kind of active fan participation: "Wrestling's target audience [...] can't reach the distance necessary to view wrestling with a critical eye. The audience, young boys especially, think it's real; Jhally says" (Souza 2002: n.p.). Here, Jhally asserts that wrestling fans "can't" coherently critique wrestling—that the youthful fans "think it's real." He also claims there have been backyard wrestling-related deaths; none of these assertions are true. The picture suggests benumbed youths mindlessly buying into this clearly corrosive imagery. This "cultural dope" theory of the audience has been effectively dismantled when it comes to most media reception situations, yet wrestling fans as critical readers seem hard for critics to grasp. Smart wrestling fans indulge in elaborate criticism of wrestling (see Lipscomb 2005 for a discussion of websites), often showing a sophisticated grasp of nuance, and playing with the notions of reality and unreality. We would not deny that Vince McMahon's WWE glorifies images and themes that are disrespectful and harmful to women, gays, and minorities—but this in itself is often a subject of Smart discussion and ridicule. But the

WWE is not the beginning and end of wrestling, and by contributing to this misperception, Jhally and other critics misunderstand the more creative and variable worlds of indy and backyard wrestling. Even Jenkins (1997), who has a more nuanced understanding of wrestling as melodrama, does not see the producerly potential in wrestling that he has identified among other fan groups.

Ethnographic studies of media audiences and fans reveal dimensions of experience that social criticism does not. A mass-mediated cultural phenomenon such as wrestling is sustained by the interaction of physical, productive practices within the context of a socially learned aesthetic. Audience ethnography can access the specific knowledge of the mediated phenomenon—the interaction of producer-fan practice and fan values. In the case of the wrestling audience, the behavior patterns of wrestling shows in general, and backyard wrestling in particular, are meaningful in the specific contexts of Smart fandom versus Mark fandom. We argue that the backyard wrestling “ritual” was replicated so uniformly across the nation not solely because children were imitating what they saw on television but because a certain productivity was enabled by a particular configuration of material culture (video cameras and trampolines, cable TV and Internet service) that was available relatively uniformly. The wrestling experience offered something even more than active fandom, in that it allowed participants to explore the limits of physical sensation that goes far beyond the spectator role. Grossberg (1984b) describes the yearning of young people to *feel* through music, in an alienating world of images: “I’d rather feel bad than feel nothing at all.” Wrestling offers a similar rush of feeling—controlled, almost ecstatic pain that cuts through mundane and often alienating “reality.”

Part IV

Fan Audiences Worldwide *From the Global to the Local*